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ABSTRACT

Using information from seven model programs that provide foreign language instruction to elementary and middle school students, this publication addresses common questions from administrators, educators, and parents who are considering establishing early foreign language programs in their communities. Questions examine the following issues: reasons to teach foreign language in the elementary school; whether foreign language should be part of the core curriculum; whether foreign language programs are suitable for poorly-funded districts; whether students with disabilities should study foreign language; how schools or districts determine which language to teach; how a program can be sustained over time; characteristics of successful programs; which program model is best; how foreign language study can be included in the curriculum without adding time to the school day; whether there is a need to hire a separate foreign language teacher; how new students are added to language classes without hindering the progress of students already in the program; what happens to elementary students who want to continue their language study at a middle school where most students in their grade are just beginning; and whether distance or video instruction is a good way of teaching language. A list of resources, including Web-based resources, is included. (SM)

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Establishing High-Quality Foreign Language Programs in Elementary Schools

An increasing number of school districts across the United States have made a commitment to foreign language education for younger learners in the past two decades. Seven of the most successful of these programs have been identified as models in providing foreign language instruction to elementary and middle school students (see box below). Based on the experiences of these programs and others, as well as on recent research, the information that follows addresses questions frequently asked by administrators, educators, and parents who are considering establishing early foreign language programs in their communities.

MODEL EARLY FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROGRAMS

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Web sites:
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http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/8714

Springfield Public Schools
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Richmond Elementary School
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http://www.moshihola.org

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Why teach foreign language in elementary school? Is it worth it?

Schools invest time, funding, personnel, and other resources because they have found that early-start language learning programs provide significant benefits to students.

Early-start language learning improves cognitive skills and academic performance. Foreign language study contributes to brain development and overall learning, according to research studies of foreign language learners' performance in school and on tests. Recent studies suggest the following benefits of early second language learning:

- Increased creativity and problem-solving skills. Children who study foreign languages improve in the verbal and non-verbal skills that enhance overall school performance.
- Improved performance on basic skills tests and the Scholastic Aptitude Test. It has been shown that the more years of foreign language study that students have, the higher the scores they achieve on math and verbal SAT tests.
- Enhanced skills in English. Despite concerns that foreign language study might detract from students' progress in English, research suggests that the opposite is actually the case. In fact, progress in English language skills by children learning a foreign language is equal to or superior to that of their non-foreign language speaking peers over the long term. Perhaps this is because children discover so much about English as they learn the structure of other languages and encounter vocabulary that unlocks the meanings of many English words.

Early-start language learning opens doors to other cultures. As students learn a foreign language, they learn about the people who speak the language, their history, traditions and customs, and the geography of their countries. Broadening students' global outlook is one of the main reasons that Springfield (Massachusetts) Public Schools has included foreign language study for every student in first grade and above since 1993. Children participating in foreign language classes learn to look beyond their customary borders, gain insight into their own language and culture, and develop an early understanding of relationships among cultures and languages. Cross-cultural lessons and experiences shared in language classes are enjoyable and engaging for young learners and are a necessity in our increasingly interdependent world.

Early-start language learning contributes to a lifelong ability to communicate. "Studying French in elementary school contributed to the kind of life I lead and the job that I hold today," wrote Richard Steffans, a Foreign Service officer who graduated from Glastonbury (Connecticut) Public Schools. Students who learn a language early improve their chances for native-like pronunciation and a high level of proficiency later on. Beginning foreign language study in elementary school helps them develop an understanding of what language learning is for and gain confidence in language learning later on. Because they have enjoyed the benefits of early foreign language study, they are less likely to treat language as a meaningless academic requirement later on. These learners will see language as a tool to be used for a wide range of educational possibilities, career opportunities, and personal interests.

Should foreign language study be part of the core curriculum?

Core subjects are those of central importance, such as reading, mathematics, and science, that are scheduled during the regular school day. Designating foreign language study as one of these core subjects is essential for a successful program. In districts and schools where foreign language study is part of the core curriculum, there tends to be a more rigorous approach to curriculum development, instructor qualifications and professional development, assessment, articulation, and other key program areas. If foreign language instruction is relegated to the status of an extra-curricular activity, not only will it compete with sports, music lessons, and other high-interest activities, it will also very likely lack the aspects that make learning a language worth the time and effort. Foreign languages are recognized as part of the core curriculum in the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (1994). As a core curriculum subject, foreign language study enhances learners' chances for success and can

contribute to the learning of other subjects as well. Adequate time must be scheduled for foreign language instruction during the school day if children are to achieve the basic competencies that will contribute to fluency.

Are elementary foreign language programs suitable for school districts that are not well-funded?

The seven model early foreign language programs are located in communities that reflect a range of socio-economic characteristics. Foreign language study benefits all students, not just those who are gifted or those in districts that enjoy high levels of funding. Providing foreign language study is not just a minor enrichment in a curriculum; it can alter the culture of a school and open opportunities that would not exist otherwise. A broad world view, improved cognitive skills, and enhanced language skills may be even more important for students from average and lower income families than for more advantaged students.

Is foreign language study appropriate for students who are learning English as a second language?

Foreign language study does not detract from progress in other subjects, including English. In fact, foreign language may be one area in which students learning English are on an equal footing with their English-speaking peers. If some students speak the targeted foreign language at home, they can serve as cultural and linguistic resources for other students as they focus on learning the more academic forms of their own language. In one program model, the two-way immersion approach, subjects are taught in both English and another language, with the goal of promoting full bilingual proficiency of native and non-native speakers of English. Such an approach provides linguistic enrichment for all students, while promoting better understanding between linguistic communities.

Should students with disabilities study foreign languages?

The U.S. Department of Education has stated that the regular classroom in the neighborhood school is the preferred placement option for all but the most severely disabled student. Students with disabilities benefit from studying foreign languages as much as other subjects. Exposure to other languages can help these children become more aware of and gain more control over language skills in English. Further, because children with disabilities may be restricted in other aspects of their lives, they particularly benefit from the exposure to other cultures that foreign language study involves. The needs and abilities of any one of these learners depend in part on the kind of disability, so it is particularly important for foreign language teachers to learn how their students' disabilities affect the learning of the language and what strategies are recommended.

Will there be lasting results?

Although there can be no guarantee of lasting results, an early start in foreign language learning can result in considerable levels of proficiency and continued interest in languages and cultures. If a school or district invests in a well-articulated program with a long sequence of foreign language instruction, the chances are high that students will graduate from secondary school with useful foreign language skills. The public schools in Glastonbury, Connecticut, have offered such a program in Russian, French, and Spanish since the mid-1950s, and their high school graduates tend to place into at least the third semester, and sometimes into the third year, of university language programs. In Portland, Oregon, students at Richmond Elementary School spend one half of the day learning in Japanese and the other half in English, beginning in kindergarten. Results are vividly documented in videotaped oral interviews conducted at the end of each year. Students at the end of the first grade are able to give brief memorized replies to familiar questions. By fifth grade, they participate successfully in a 15-minute standardized interview procedure designed for secondary students.

How does a school or district determine which language(s) to teach?

At least five factors play a part in this decision:

National or international importance. Aside from the increasing dominance of Spanish, and the prevalence of French and German, language programs in the United States increasingly reflect shifts in national language priorities toward such languages as Japanese, Chinese, and Arabic. Those who study these languages in primary and secondary school will be eager to find a college where they can continue their language studies, because their language skill will be a valuable asset in the job market.

Community support. A feeling of ownership and commitment may be enhanced if parents and others in the community are part of the process of selecting the languages to be taught. In communities where parents have lobbied for early foreign language programs to be established, opinions as to which language is taught may be quite strong. Building community support and respect can be very important for a program, especially during times of severe fiscal constraints.

Languages and heritage of the students. When a district or school selects a foreign language connected to the ethnic background of the community, there are several advantages. Besides the community support that is likely in such an instance, there is also a long-term benefit to society and to the children themselves. Some kindergarten-age children may already speak their mother tongue (the language they speak at home) more proficiently than those who have studied the language formally for many years. Thus, it will be easier for them to become literate in the language and to master its more formal and academic forms than it will be for students learning the language for the first time in school.

Articulation. If a language sequence is already in place for middle and high school levels, this should be taken into account when selecting language(s) for the elementary school level. If a new language is chosen, a plan needs to be established to maintain the other language programs as well as to offer higher levels of language proficiency in the new language. Students must have the opportunity to continue their language study beyond the elementary grades, preferably in a language of their own choosing.

Resources. A number of practical questions must be asked when determining which language to teach. Are teachers of the language available? Are there appropriate textbooks, reference books, and other materials in the language? Are curricula available? Will another school, district, or university be able to offer support or resources for this language? One of the main reasons that the K-12 immersion program in Prince George's County, Maryland, selected French was that a successful French immersion program in a nearby district could contribute curricula and share resources.

How can a program be sustained over time?

Two keys to a sustainable program are long-range planning and diversity of funding. If a language program in the elementary school is to enjoy continued success, it must be part of a comprehensive, long-range plan for language instruction in the district that includes foreign language programs in middle and high schools. Second, although special funds may be available for program start-up, alternative sources of funding should be explored as soon as possible. Private foundations, local businesses, federal and state grants, and even assistance from foreign governments can supplement local district funding. In many districts, parents help the schools hold carnivals, poetry contests, and art fairs to raise funds for language program projects. In Portland, Oregon, parents with children in a K-12 Japanese immersion program have incorporated as a non-profit organization for fund-raising purposes.

What are characteristics of successful programs?

Enjoyable, meaningful language lesson materials and activities. Language learning takes place in meaningful, communicative contexts, including social situations, cultural experiences, lessons in other school subjects, songs, rhymes, games, and stories. A variety of authentic, culture-rich, and age-appropriate materials is key to foreign language learning. Such high-interest materials as foreign language newspapers and videos for children are more widely available than ever before.

Curricula based on the national foreign language standards. The curricula in all grades focus on the "five Cs" of Communities, Communication, Cultures, Connections (to other subjects), and Comparisons (with other languages and cultures).

Clear program goals. There are clearly stated goals for the program and for each grade level. See the chart that follows for examples of program goals for different types of programs.

Regular program evaluation. In addition to assessing student progress and achievement, the language programs themselves should be assessed. For example, the language program in Glastonbury, Connecticut, is evaluated every five years through a process that includes surveys of parents, staff, and past and current students.

Accessibility for all students. Every student, not just the gifted and talented, can learn foreign languages. The classes should be open to all, regardless of academic goals, ethnic background, socioeconomic status, or learning style.

Communication and coordination across content areas. In successful programs, language teachers incorporate other subject matter into their lessons, reinforcing and complementing instruction in these areas. Language teachers and the regular classroom teachers share curricula, attend joint meetings periodically, and maintain ongoing informal communication.

Articulation among grades in elementary school and from elementary school to later grades. Most successful foreign language programs begin by adding only one new grade each succeeding year, so that realistic goals can be set and the language skills are developed in a well-coordinated sequence. Connections between elementary programs and foreign language instruction in later grades are strengthened and clarified by periodic meetings of involved teachers and by using curricula that build knowledge and skills from grade to grade. In Glastonbury, Connecticut, foreign language teachers at different schools periodically trade places with one another for a short time in order to gain a deeper understanding of the links between language instruction in upper and lower grades.

Well-qualified teachers who receive regular professional development. Foreign language teachers in elementary grades should have native or near-native proficiency in the target language, be certified as elementary teachers, and have a background in child language acquisition and foreign language teaching methods. At Ephesus Road Elementary School, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, a strong relationship with the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has resulted in ongoing professional development for the language program staff and a mutually beneficial student teaching arrangement.

> ***If a language program in the elementary school is to enjoy continued success, it must be part of a comprehensive, long-range plan for language instruction in the district that includes foreign language programs in middle and high schools.***

What program model is best?

The chart below concisely summarizes different types of language programs in the United States.

Characteristics of Elementary Foreign Language Programs

Programs That Are Sequential • Cumulative • Continuous • Proficiency-Oriented • Part of an Integrated K-12 Sequence		
Program Type	*Percent of Class Time Spent in Foreign Language per week*	*Goals*
Total Immersion Grades K-6	**50-100%** (Time is spent learning *subject matter* taught in foreign language; language learning per se incorporated as necessary thoughout curriculum.)	To become functionally proficient in the foreign language. To master subject content taught in the foreign language. To acquire an understanding of an appreciation for other cultures.
Two-Way Immersion Grades K-6 (Also called two-way bilingual, dual language or developmental bilingual education)	**At least 50%** (Time is spent learning *subject matter* taught in foreign language; language learning per se incorporated as necessary thoughout curriculum. Student population is both native speakers of English and of the foreign language.)	To become functionally proficient in language that is new to the student. To master subject content taught in the foreign language. To acquire an understanding of and appreciation for other cultures.
Partial Immersion Grades K-6	**Approx. 50%** (Time is spent learning *subject matter* taught in foreign language; language learning per se incorporated as necessary thoughout curriculum.)	To become functionally proficient in the language (although to a lesser extent than is possible in total immersion.) To master subject content taught in the new language. To acquire an understanding of and appreciation for other cultures.
Content-Based / Content - Enriched FLES Grades K-6	**15 - 50%** (Time spent learning language per se as well as learning subject matter in the foreign language.)	To acquire proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing the foreign language. To use subject content as a vehicle for acquiring foreign language skills. To acquire an understanding of and appreciation for other cultures.
FLES Grades K-6	**10 - 20%** (Minimum of 30-40 minutes per class, 3-5 days per week.) Time is spent learning language per se.	To acquire proficiency in listening, and speaking (degree of proficiency varies with the program). To acquire an understanding of and appreciation for other cultures. To acquire some proficiency in reading and writing (emphasis varies with the program.)

The chart displays information that may be important when deciding which type of program to implement.

Answering these questions may help in making decisions about which program type to select.

- What are the language proficiency goals of the district or school?
- How broad or intensive a program can be supported?
- How much interest and support is there from parents and others in the community?
- How convinced are district staff, principals, and teachers that foreign language learning is worthwhile?
- What funding is available?

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Scheduling

How can foreign language study be included in the curriculum without adding time to the school day?

In order for foreign language instruction to be effective, it must have the status of a core subject. This means that time in the regular school day must be found or created for foreign language instruction. One model that addresses concerns of the foreign language teacher and regular classroom teachers is content-enriched instruction. In this model, time is carved out of the day for foreign language instruction that focuses on topics from other subjects, providing reinforcement and enrichment of concepts in math, geography, science, or language arts, for example. The content-enriched foreign language lesson provides emphasis and review of important elements in the core curriculum. Classroom teachers and principals are often receptive to this type of program because it contributes to the development of knowledge in the core content areas and supports the basic mission of the school. "Foreign language definitely adds to-and never subtracts from-the regular classroom instruction," said a regular classroom teacher at Bay Point Elementary School in Pinellas County, Florida, where the Spanish foreign language teachers make sure that their lessons feature topics from science, geography, or math curricula.

How much time should be allotted per class?

In light of the national foreign language standards and the ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners, experts recommend that language classes meet from 3-5 days per week for no less than 30-40 minutes per class. This will ensure that students receive the amount of instruction needed to meet the goals of the national standards. In a content-enriched program, a daily one-hour language class is strongly recommended. Of course, in a partial or total immersion program, 50-100% of class time is conducted in the foreign language.

Staffing

Do we need to hire a separate foreign language teacher, or can we use classroom teachers already on staff?

If one of the teachers on staff is a native- or near-native speaker of the target language, this person may be a good choice to implement the program. The two absolute musts are that foreign language teachers be certified for the grade levels they will teach and be native or near-native speakers of the language taught. It is important that foreign language teachers have good speaking and listening skills in the language and that they are familiar with the countries and cultures where the target language is spoken, especially the aspects that are relevant to children's interests and learning needs. It is also important that the teachers understand first and second language acquisition in children, have had coursework in K-8 foreign language methodology, and have a general knowledge of the elementary school curriculum in the different grades.

How many language teachers are needed per school? How many classes should each teacher teach per day?

Specific answers to these questions will depend on the size of the school and the type of program model implemented, but answers must be based on the assumption that a successful language program will be good for the teachers as well as for the students. Assuming that a FLES [Foreign Language in the Elementary School] or a content-enriched program is put in place, below are seven do's and don'ts for scheduling and managing foreign language teachers in elementary schools.

Do hire at least one foreign language teacher per school so that the teacher is part of the school staff and can communicate and coordinate with regular classroom teachers.

Do provide adequate workspace. If teachers need to wheel a materials cart from classroom to classroom, ensure that they also have an office or workspace that is their own and that has room for materials, a telephone, and a computer.

Don't schedule all the language classes back to back. Foreign language teachers need time between classes to gather materials, re-focus on a new group of students, and possibly adapt their lesson to meet a regular classroom teacher's requests.

Do consider how many students a foreign language teacher will meet with each week. No one teacher can be expected to keep track of-much less really teach-600 students in a week. Fourteen classes in a day is not a reasonable workload; eight 30-minute classes per day is a maximum load.

Don't expect that the language teacher's number of contact hours will be the same as that of the classroom teachers. Because a language teacher usually meets with a larger number of students and must travel from classroom to classroom, he or she may spend fewer hours per week with students than does a regular elementary classroom teacher.

Don't require the foreign language teacher to handle multiple grade levels in a single day. Because children's developmental levels are so different in the elementary grades, it is sufficiently challenging for a teacher to work with two grades.

Do build time in the foreign language teacher's schedule to collaborate with the regular classroom teachers, develop and adapt materials, and participate in meetings and opportunities for professional development.

Long-Term Program Maintenance

How are new students added to the language classes without hindering the progress of students already in the program?

Many elementary schools report that accommodating new students in the foreign language classes is a major challenge, but there are successes in this area also, including these strategies implemented at Baypoint Elementary School in Pinellas County, Florida. During each of the first ten school days of the academic year, students new to the foreign language program meet for a class period with the Spanish teachers for intensive, individualized instruction. New incoming students

- learn some of the core material already covered by their peers,
- practice strategies for coping in the foreign language class,
- become familiar with computer programs and other tools for independent learning, and
- are assigned a buddy in their class to act as a partner and model in the language learning process.

The foreign language program in Glastonbury, Connecticut, provides children and their parents with a packet of materials that includes a booklet of language learning hints, an overview of the language, suggested references and resources, and dozens of interactive independent learning exercises that use an audiotape and print materials.

In most districts, incoming students are counseled not to expect to quickly reach the same level of proficiency as the other children. They are encouraged to develop proficiency at their own pace and to keep their expectations realistic.

How can a program ensure that children will be interested in continuing language study in later years?

The chances for motivating children for later language study will be increased when early language study is engaging and rewarding. The benefits of language learning will come only when sufficient time is invested in language study. The best way to promote continued study is to treat language as a core subject from the start. Observing the following tips may also foster a child's continued interest in language learning.

1) *Link the language learning experience with the community.* Language fairs, competitions, and involvement of parents and community members keep the language classes vital. These outreach efforts demonstrate to children that language learning is important to the adults around them.

2) *Incorporate cultural activities.* When foods, music, dance, and videos linked to the target culture are introduced, students can enjoy the vital cultural context of the language they are learning.

3) *Provide opportunities for genuine communication.* Language learning comes alive for students when they can use the language to interview visitors, write to pen pals, and use Internet or e-mail to communicate with other learners and native speakers of the language.

4) *Guide students toward insights into themselves and their own language and culture through comparisons with the new language and culture.* By the later elementary years, students can see how other cultures reflect different values and priorities.

5) *Offer options.* In order to encourage continued language study, staff in successful programs ask students at the beginning of middle school to decide whether to continue with the language they began earlier or to start a new one. As students mature and develop different interests and motivation, offering options becomes particularly important.

What happens to elementary students who want to continue their language study at a middle school where most students in their grade are just beginning?

Comprehensive long-range planning at the outset will help address this issue. An elementary foreign language program cannot succeed in isolation; it must link to higher grades to build the long sequence of instruction that is critical to developing proficiency. The state of New Jersey has developed a plan that involves the concepts of "multiple entry points" and "language layering." According to this plan, districts in the state allow students to continue with their original foreign language, as well as to add ("layer") or switch languages at several points in the K-12 sequence–after some measurable competency has been achieved. This plan also provides a number of starting points for students new to the district. Nonetheless, it does happen, particularly in instances where school-based management is the trend or when district attendance boundaries shift, that some proficient students may enter a middle school, for example, that offers only beginning level language classes to sixth graders. A pragmatic, though imperfect, strategy is to place the proficient sixth graders in a foreign language class with students in one of the higher grades. However, younger students are often reluctant to participate fully in a class with older learners.

An alternative, innovative solution is being explored in Glastonbury, Connecticut, where Japanese and Russian language lessons are offered to a number of middle- and high-school students through two-way video teleconferencing. This technology-supported program provides a long-sequence program to learners of less commonly taught languages, thus allowing elementary schools to continue to offer these languages as well.

A number of schools are using satellite broadcasts to teach foreign language to children. Is distance or video instruction a good way of teaching language?

In order to learn a new language, students must interact creatively among themselves and with a proficient speaker of the language. This means that one-way video or broadcast material cannot replace live instruction. On the other hand, these media can enrich a foreign language program and provide flexibility. In a Japanese program in Portland, Oregon, regular classroom teachers in six participating schools earn continuing education credits by attending staff development training every other week. In these sessions, they learn how to work effectively with the 15- to 25-minute locally produced Japanese lessons that are beamed into their classrooms four times per week. Japanese-speaking university students earn academic credit by assisting the teachers in the classrooms during the week, thus providing the essential opportunity for creative interaction.

Programs in a number of languages, mostly in Spanish, are now distributed on video and/or are broadcast using satellite technology. They may be worthwhile options for a school or district, depending on how well they are implemented and how much support is provided for each classroom. With the kind of support that the distance-learning program in Portland, Oregon, is providing, these technology-based language programs may be quite effective.

Conclusion

The seven model programs demonstrate the value of implementing foreign language programs in elementary schools. Students, parents, schools, and communities take pride in the expanded world view and communication benefits that a foreign language program can provide. It is hoped that the success of these programs will encourage other schools and districts to initiate their own early foreign language programs, but starting a new program should not be a hasty decision. If a program is implemented without careful planning or suffers from inadequate support, the results will be unsatisfactory and may lead to widespread skepticism about language learning. Establishing high-quality foreign language programs in elementary schools requires a solid commitment of expertise, time, funding, and personnel, but that commitment is clearly worth making.

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Useful Web-Based Resources

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages - ACTFL is a national organization that represents teachers of all languages at all educational levels. http://www.actfl.org

Center for Applied Linguistics - CAL works to promote and improve the teaching and learning of languages and also serves as a resource for information about languages and cultures. http://www.cal.org

ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics - ERIC/CLL provides a wide range of services and materials for language educators. http://www.cal.org/ericcll/

FLTEACH Web Site - This is an integrated service for foreign language teachers that consists of a Web site, a listserve, and two listserve archives. http://www.cortland.edu/www_root/flteach/flteach.html

Knowing Other Languages Brings Opportunities - This brochure from the Modern Language Association aims to motivate Americans to study languages. http://www.mla.org/

Ñandu: The Listserve for Early Language Learning - This Brown LAB-sponsored listserve for teachers, administrators, and teacher trainers offers discussions on timely issues related to early language instruction. Participants provide resources to one another, talk with occasional "expert" moderators, and share experiences on early language teaching. To join, send message to nandu-request@caltalk.cal.org. Leave the subject field blank. In the message field, type: "SUBSCRIBE YOURFIRSTNAME YOURLASTNAME".

Ñandutí: The Web Site on Early Language Learning - The Brown LAB's foreign language project's Web site provides up-to-date information on early-start/long sequence foreign language programs to parents, teachers, and administrators. http://www.cal.org/earlylang

National Directory of Early Foreign Language Programs - This is a searchable national database of public and private elementary and middle schools in the United States that begin foreign language instruction before grade 7. http://www.cal.org/ericcll/earlyfl/

National Network for Early Language Learning - NNELL is a membership organization for educators that promotes opportunities for all children to develop a high level of competence in at least one language in addition to their own. http://www.educ.iastate.edu/nnell

The Benefits of Early Language Learning: ERIC/CLL Resource Guide Online - This resource guide provides a variety of types of information on benefits and rationale for elementary language learning. http://www.cal.org/ericcll/faqs/rgos/benes.html

Why, How and When Should My Child Learn a Second Language? - This brochure for parents from the ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics explores the benefits of knowing a second language. http://www.accesseric.org/resources/parent/language.html

PERSPECTIVES on Policy and Practice

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